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Reference Code: 2021/95/42

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Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Albert Reynolds, T.D.,
at the Annual Wolfe Tone Commemoration,
Sunday, 18 October 1993 at 12 noon.

The memory of Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen will always be honoured for their courageous efforts to bridge the divide between our main traditions, and to forge an independent Irish nation, in which ancient conflicts and animosities would be buried.

Tragically, circumstances eluded them. Subsequently, with some exceptions, each tradition went their separate way. We may profoundly regret that a community of around 900,000 people in the North have not since chosen to make common cause with us. But it is a situation that will certainly never be changed by violence or the threat of violence.

At his trial, Wolfe Tone repudiated atrocities. The vicious and often sectarian violence of the last quarter century makes a mockery of the ideals of the United Irishmen. It has driven communities further apart, and created distrust and tension which will take a long time to heal.

The talks process is vital, and for our part we remain committed to political dialogue to bring about progress. Despite strenuous efforts, both Governments have found it difficult to make real political progress in present conditions. Peace is by far the best path to any worthwhile and durable advance. It is ultimately the responsibility of the two Governments to provide a framework, which would make this possible.

Both the Unionist and the Nationalist communities have identities and important rights, which cannot be ignored or trampled upon. The Irish Government do not seek to impose a solution. We do seek a just and lasting peace. I have to ask again, who is afraid of peace? Have not both communities suffered enough? Is it not the heartfelt wish of every decent person throughout this island that the horrible violence which degrades us all should be brought an end once and for all?

We must all recognise that a broad accommodation of different identities, rights and aspirations can only be on the basis of freely given agreement and consent. We seek peace without seeking to predetermine the future. We will always continue to uphold our democratic Republican ideals, believing that a united Ireland established by agreement and consent will in the long run provide the best and most lasting solution. But let there be no doubt that we will always strive in the meantime to reach as much agreement as is possible, without prejudice to what might be achieved in the longer term.

We have now reached a critical moment, where perhaps the fate of this country, our futures and our children's future stands to be decided. It requires a genuine effort on everyone's part to recognise the validity of both traditions, in particular the validity of the tradition of the other. Nationalists have to recognise the strength of Unionists' desire to retain close links with Britain. But equally, Unionists have to recognise the desire of Nationalists for closer links between the two parts of Ireland than exist at present. Except at the extremes, and provided an absolutist approach is avoided, there need be no fundamental incompatibility between these two positions. Neither tradition can unilaterally decide or determine what is good for the other. They have to seek agreement from each other. Rights need to be exercised within a mutually agreed framework, and it is that we must strive for.

Our Government have a special responsibility to understand the legitimate fears and anxieties of both traditions. To echo a phrase from Wolfe Tone's autobiography, nobody should feel a stranger in their own land. While we have an obvious duty to give moral support to those who share a sense of identity with us,

we have to acknowledge and seek to remedy the alienation from an Irish identity of a substantial section of the Northern population. We must be prepared as part of a new overall agreement to undertake balanced constitutional change, so that our aims and ideals, to which we hold fast, are expressed in a way that reflects a new spirit of mutual understanding.

For, after peace, the greatest task ahead of us will be reconciliation. In the past, perhaps, we all tended to think too much in terms of majorities and minorities. By the lights of their day, the founders of our State showed a scrupulous regard for the rights and participation of minorities. Nevertheless, minorities were expected to fit in with the ideals and the ethos of the majority. In the North, a much larger minority was perceived more as a threat, and there was discrimination. Both North and South, it was considered that large political questions could be determined by majority rule.

Today, through our own experience and with the aid of post-war international example, we have developed a much deeper understanding of democracy, of what is needed to form a cohesive political entity to which all can give their allegiance. Here we have come to understand that any society is composed of many different groups, religious, cultural, regional and social, few of which enjoy majority status. The homogenous and monolithic appearance of Irish society fifty years ago has given way to a much greater diversity and acceptance of pluralism. The process of mutual accommodation has been much more difficult in the North over the last 25 years. Nothing in the longer term will assist progress towards such an accommodation more than the establishment of peace.

Since I came to office, my foremost aim has been to establish a formula for peace. The talks process between the leaders of the SDLP and Sinn Féin has helped to provide elements, that could, when further developed, supply an important part of the basis for peace. But the two Governments must work together to reach a common understanding in their own terms on a framework for peace, consistent with their international obligations and their wider responsibilities to both communities.

We have seen in many parts of the world enormous progress towards solving bitter conflicts and the achievement of an understanding between people, who had far stronger objective and emotional reasons for remaining for ever irreconcilable. A breakthrough has been achieved in South Africa, with the white Government and

the African National Congress recognising that they have to work in partnership. I heard from Nelson Mandela last Sunday, how the ANC has turned from a long campaign of resistance into helping to build a new and democratic South Africa. Recently, we have seen Israel and the PLO reach a peace agreement. While there are many crucial differences in those situations and ours, there are nonetheless lessons to be learnt. Those who want a Palestinian State had to decide whether, in the interests of their people, they could accept for the moment very much less, leaving many crucial matters for negotiation in an atmosphere of confidence-building.

Similar courage is required in the North of Ireland, particularly on the part of those from both sides who identify with and come from the most disadvantaged sections of the community. Others, however strong their distaste at terrible deeds, must be prepared to accept parties with an electoral mandate into the normal democratic process, once a definitive renunciation of violence has been clearly and unequivocally established.

I welcome a number of helpful Ulster Unionist statements to that effect.

In the end, everything that is done must be open and above board. There can be no secret agreements or understandings between Governments and organisations supporting violence as a price for its cessation. There will be no reneging on existing international agreements. The principle that negotiations on a political settlement can only take place between democratic Governments and parties committed exclusively to constitutional methods will be upheld.

The deep divisions in the North of Ireland were never capable of being resolved by force, neither from 1912 to 1921, nor today. Let us now seek to close this long and unhappy chapter of the last 25 years, which has cast a dark shadow over Irish history and over all our lives. Yet in so doing we must recognise there have been many instances on all sides of great civic courage, of an indomitable spirit in the face of adversity. Let the tremendous energy, determination and creativity among the people of the North be used to strengthen the links of civil society, to rebuild a prosperous economy, and to create a new spirit of partnership between the communities, between North and South, and between Britain and Ireland.